EPA appreciates the ongoing discussion in Silverton regarding mining-related contamination and deteriorating water quality in the Animas River. These are important issues and we are eager to engage with the community and to work with you. However, we would also like to highlight some facts. EPA had no role in the decision to plug the American Tunnel or to stop water treatment. Actually, we expressed serious concerns about plugging the tunnel in 1993.

There are naturally high levels of metals such as aluminum and iron in parts of the Red Mountain District. However, there are higher metals loads – copper, cadmium, lead, manganese and zinc---that can be attributed to uncontrolled mine discharges since the American Tunnel was plugged and water treatment ceased. This fact is well documented in assessments done by both EPA and the Animas River Stakeholders Group.

EPA has collaborated with Silverton residents on water quality concerns since the 1990s. The community requested that EPA not use Superfund listing to address contamination. EPA listened, and since then has consistently supported the Animas River Stakeholders Group with money, EPA staff resources, and actions that complemented community-led efforts to improve water quality.

EPA, believes that after 15 years, it is time to do more to address the water quality problems. Despite some progress in parts of the watershed, water quality has deteriorated in upper Cement Creek, and it has become clear that action is needed to reverse this trend. Identifying effective solutions will include a careful evaluation of treatment methods and the best ways to manage residual wastes, including sludge.

EPA's interest is improved water quality. We embrace the ongoing dialogue about the problem and next steps to developing an effective and implementable plan for improving water quality, and we look forward to exchanging more information and ideas in upcoming town meetings and other forums.

Sincerely,
Carol Campbell Assistant Regional Administrator
Office of Ecosystems, Protection and Remediation